1 ENGLISH SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

- highly impoverished verbal morphology
- agreement limited to present tense of non-modals plus past tense of be
- apart from be (with forms am : is : are and was : were), verbs distinguish only third singular vs the rest (want : wants)

The verb agrees with the subject, whose person-number features derive from its head noun.

Subject-verb agreement is subject to different principles from agreement within the noun phrase:

(1) this / *these family
(2) The family have all arrived.

1.1 Clausal subjects

- clausal subjects are treated as singular

(3) For John to let us down is unthinkable.

- other non-nominal subjects are treated as singular

(4) From London to Cambridge is the furthest I have ever cycled.

1.2 Collective nouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>army</th>
<th>(school)</th>
<th>class</th>
<th>committee</th>
<th>crew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>government</td>
<td>team</td>
<td>university</td>
<td>family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Animate collective nouns allow ‘plural override’:

(5) The committee were (GB) / was (US) unanimous.
(6) England are firm favourites for the match.

1.2.1 Collectivity vs. individuality

The singular–plural distinction is often said to reflect a difference in meaning:

plural => individual members of the collective
singular => the collective as a unit

Contrast difference in interpretation between:

(7) The committee was surprisingly large.
(8) The committee were surprisingly large.
(9) The committee works well.
(10) The committee work well.

Adjectives may modify the 'shell' (= group) or the individuals:
(11) a young committee (= newly-formed)
(12) a young family (= young individuals)

Contexts in which collective nouns require / favour a singular:
• when modified by a demonstrative (This army is / *are the best.)
• when modified by quantifiers which select a singular count noun, such as each, every (Every family has / *have a story to tell.)

Contexts in which collective nouns require / favour plural:
• when modified by a numeral (Three crew have / *has arrived late.)
• when modified by quantifiers that select a plural count noun, such as many, all (Many crew have / *has arrived late; All the team have / *has done the best possible)

But even here, exceptions are common:
(13) This team is / are the best we've ever had.

1.2.2 The semantics of the predicate
• predicates that imply decomposition of a unity (consist of, be dispersed, scatter) or are applicable only to the group as a whole (and not its individual members) favour singular:
(14) The committee consists / ??consist of eight members.

But this is only a tendency, and there are exceptions:
(15) The committee were / was unanimous in their decision.
(16) (#Each member of the committee was unanimous.)

• predicates that apply to the individuals / presuppose differentiation (disagree, quarrel) favour plural:
(17) The class get / ?gets on well.

1.2.3 Syntax: Floating quantifiers and demonstratives
• floating quantifiers force plural:
(18) The committee have / *has all now resigned.
(19) The crew have / *has both agreed to change sponsor.

• demonstratives force singular agreement, even outside of the noun phrase:
(20) That / *Those committee has now met.

1.2.4 Animacy
In contrast to animates, inanimate collectives follow ordinary singular agreement:
(21) The crockery was / *were lying on the table.

1.2.5 Dialect / variety
Informant test (Peters 1999):
In some quarters the clergy is / are undecided about the ordination of women.  (UK: 68% plural; US 55% plural)

I wonder if the orchestra has / have tuned their instruments yet.  (UK: 57% plural; US: 26% plural)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% plural</th>
<th>American English</th>
<th>German</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>couple</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>majority</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The effect of medium (spoken vs. written) is disputed.

1.2.6 Agreement hierarchies

Corbett: the possibility of syntactic agreement decreases (universally) from left to right along a hierarchy:

(24) attributive – predicative – relative pronoun – personal pronoun

This correctly predicts the following contrast:

(25) Our team looks as though they’re in for a real beating.
(26) *Our team look as though it’s in for a real beating.

1.3 Quantificational nouns

(27) A lot of people are / *is interested in tennis.  (count)
(28) A series of mistakes were / ??was made.  (count)
(29) Loads of money has / *have been squandered.  (mass)

Contrast:
(30) A box of eggs has / *have fallen from the shelf.  (count irrelevant)

Some nouns are both quantificational and non-quantificational:
(31) A bunch of football fans have / *has arrived.
(32) A bunch of flowers ??have / has arrived.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% plural</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>German</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the majority of adults</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a number of critical issues</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a series of reports</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a group of researchers</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a gang of thugs</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a crowd of supporters</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a heap of old papers</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a bunch of flowers</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Berg 1998)
Berg (1998): Where syntax and semantics conflict, English resolves in favour of semantic agreement because it has impoverished verbal morphology, whereas German resolves in favour of syntax because of its rich verbal morphology.

1.3 Measure expressions

(33) Two weeks is a long time in politics.
(34) Ten pounds is too much for a beer.

These may have internal singular syntax (contrast committee above):

(35) That ten days we spent in Florida was / *were fantastic.
(36) Those ten days we spent in Florida were / *was fantastic.

1.4 Who / what
Defaul
t singular agreement with who / what can be overriden by a presupposition that the answer is plural:

(37) Who were behind the conspiracy to assassinate the president?

1.5 Agreement and coordination

1.5.2 Coordination with and
Where the two conjuncts have the same (singular) referrent, singular agreement is compulsory. Contrast:

(38) Our chef and chauffeur has decided to emigrate.
(39) Our chef and chauffeur have (both) decided to emigrate.

1.5.2 Coordination with or
Normally coordination with or leads to singular agreement if both conjuncts are singular:

(40) Either John or Mary is in first place.

Where the conjuncts are not of the same number, agreement fails to resolve:

(41) Either Mary or her brothers ?have / *has broken the window.

1.6 Theoretical issues

• is agreement meaningful?
• are items inserted with features?
• are two sets of agreement features necessary for subjects?
• when an item triggers both, is it two different lexical entries?

READING

General


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**Comparative aspects**

**Dialect variation**